

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Rabbi Sidney Berkowitz Project

Personal Experience

O.H. 1521

ELEANOR M. KATZ

Interviewed

by

Matthew T. Butts

on

June 21, 1992

ELEANOR KATZ

Mrs. Eleanor Katz was born on January 19, 1927 in the city of Sharon, Pennsylvania, the daughter of Abraham and Helen Hume. Her parents soon moved to the North Side of Youngstown, Ohio, where Katz attended secondary school at the Rayen High School, graduating in 1944.

Following high school, Mrs. Katz entered college at Cornell University, achieving her Bachelor of Arts Degree in 1948. She then returned to Youngstown, where she married Dr. Bertram Katz. Over the next 28 years, Mrs. Katz stayed at home to raise her five children: Jon, Nick, Katherine, Jeffery, and Dan.

Presently, Mrs. Katz enjoys semi-retired life. She resides with her husband of 44 years, at 27 Warner Road, Hubbard, Ohio. She continues to be an active member of the congregation of the Temple Rodef Sholom. She dedicates herself to a number of charitable organizations, including Heritage Manor Nursing Home. She spends much of her free time traveling, painting, and enjoying art.

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INTERVIEWEE: ELEANOR M. KATZ
INTERVIEWER: Matthew T. Butts
SUBJECT: Rabbi Berkowitz, Rodef Sholom, Jewish
community, Rabbi Berkowitz's impact on the
community
DATE: June 21, 1992

B: This is an interview with Eleanor M. Katz for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on the Rabbi Berkowitz project, including the Youngstown Community and the Youngstown Jewish Community, by Matthew Butts, at her residence, 27 Warner Road, Hubbard, Ohio, on June 23, 1992, at approximately 1:10 p.m.

Okay. Could you tell me a little bit about yourself, a little about your childhood, your family, if you had any brothers or sisters, your parents' name, things like that?

K: Well, I was born just across the border in Sharon, Pennsylvania. We moved to Youngstown when I was in the second grade. At that time, my family were members of a Conservative congregation. It was called Anshe Emeth and is now called El Emeth. I left Youngstown when I was 18 years old and went away to college at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. I was married the day after I graduated from college, moved to Chicago where my husband did his internship and research, then to Detroit where he started his residency in surgery. In the middle of his residency, he was called to the Korean War. I had my first child at Camp Rucker, in Enterprise, Alabama. My husband went off to Korea when

the baby was a month old. I lived with my parents in Youngstown during the time he was in Korea. When he returned after a year and a half, we went back to Detroit, where he finished his residency. In 1956, we returned to Youngstown, where he started practice in general surgery in Youngstown, Ohio. I was really away from Youngstown from 1944 until 1956.

B: Do you have any brothers and sisters?

K: I have two brothers, who went into my father's business, Hume's Furniture Store, Arnold Hume and Joseph Hume. Joseph Hume still lives in Youngstown. My brother Arnold lives on Seabrook Island, in South Carolina.

B: Oh, that's nice!

K: It's very nice.

B: It's very beautiful down there. When you were a young child growing up in Youngstown, what was the city like? What do you remember about growing up in Youngstown?

K: Well, we lived on Crandall Avenue, and I remember, during the Depression, that people would come to our back door and ask for food. Our house was open, and my mother would always, without any fears whatsoever, take sandwiches, pie, whatever she had out to those who asked for it. I was allowed to walk around in the evening. I walked downtown all the time. I never took the bus. There was never any concerns whatsoever about safety, which was very nice. Of course, there weren't any drugs at that time. Young people hadn't gone into drugs. About the worst things we did was skip school one day, and hide in terror in Crandall Park somewhere, hoping nobody would find us, or on Halloween, put pins in people's car horns and things like that.

B: What street did you live on?

K: Crandall Avenue.

B: I work a little bit with ethnic history. Is that pretty much where the Youngstown Jewish population was centered?

K: Not necessarily. I think the Jewish population was--well, there were some on the South Side, but mostly on the North Side because the synagogues were on the North Side and Orthodox Jews had to walk to the synagogue. We walked almost everywhere during that time. There were very few two car families. My father, having his own business, was gone everyday, including Sundays, and my mother didn't drive. There

were no major, large grocery stores. There were small neighborhood stores, and it was the job of the children constantly to go and pick up whatever we needed.

B: Your education in Youngstown, what was that like?

K: I went to Harding School and Hayes School and the Rayen School. I just remember that it was important to be competitive and to do well. I came through all the time, for what reason, I'm not sure. Maybe it had something to do with my parents. Maybe it had something to do with my own desires. I'm not sure why I did well. Everybody there seemed to be doing pretty well.

B: Do you remember the first time you met Rabbi Sidney Berkowitz?

K: I told you that I grew up in a Conservative synagogue. When we moved back to Youngstown after my husband finished his residency, my brother Joe and his wife Helen were already in Youngstown. They had children that were similar in age to our children, and they had joined Rodef Sholom. I remember my sister-in-law telling me why she specifically joined that temple. She was interested in Reform Judaism, but she also didn't want her children going to Hebrew school everyday after regular school. She wanted them home. She wanted to participate in the activities around the house with them rather than having them off to school again. Almost without too much consideration, I think, we joined Rodef Sholom, just so the cousins could be together. That's when I first met Rabbi Berkowitz, when we first joined the temple.

B: What struck you about him?

K: I think perhaps it was his precision and his warmth. Now, those are very general terms, I know, but I had been used to going to a temple where everybody talked at once. I don't know if you've ever been in a Conservative temple, but it's very open. You can walk up and down the aisles whenever you want to. There is rarely music. Rabbi Berkowitz's temple had a beautiful organ, and they also had a beautiful voice in the form of Cantor Erlich, who had been trained really for opera. The services were very, very relaxing as a result of the precision and the discipline that was involved. People were there at a certain time. They didn't walk in and out of the temple. They didn't talk during services. They paid attention to the book, to the prayer book. They listened to the services, where they hadn't, or at least I hadn't, in a Conservative synagogue. It also seemed to me that the Conservative synagogue was oriented towards the male congregants.

It's changed lately, but at the time I was growing up, girls were really not very important to the services, whereas I felt equal to everyone in a Reform synagogue.

I didn't get to know Rabbi Berkowitz right away. It was only as my children grew. I had contact with him during their confirmation, during my boy's bar mitzvahs. I do not remember if the choice for such existed at the time that my daughter was growing up. I think the first thing that I really remember about Rabbi Berkowitz was shortly after we joined his congregation, being invited over to his house following the High Holy Days. I was impressed with how we were welcomed into his home.

B: Speaking of you moving into a Reform temple, was this going on a lot, a lot of individuals were joining the Reform temple about the same time you were?

K: I wasn't aware of that. As I said, the only thing I considered was the fact that my brother and sister-in-law had joined the temple and that their children were going there. It was a very large congregation, so it must be true that a lot of people were joining. But, I really didn't participate in any discussions. It wasn't a philosophical choice.

B: How would you say that Rabbi Berkowitz operated the temple?

K: I think that he had complete control of everything that went on in the temple. I can't understand how he did it, because he was all over. Yet, he did everything with incredible grace. It was in the days when the rabbi went to the hospital everyday to see congregants that were ill. He seemed to have time for everything. You never had the idea that he was hurried in any way. I don't know if he ever slept, although he looked rested. He even played golf. My husband is a golfer, and he said that Rabbi Berkowitz was a very competitive golfer. He wasn't that great a golfer, but he loved the game. And you know how much time a round of golf takes. I know that he reached out to the community at large and not just his own congregation. He was at our house at the naming of our first grandchild. When my father died, he was at our house within minutes. He did this with everybody, and I feel almost as if there were 20 Rabbi Berkowitz's.

B: His involvement within the community, are you familiar with any specific organizations or anything that he was active in, say, like the American Red Cross or the United Way?

- K: I really was not familiar with anything of that nature. Just generally, I heard about the things that he had done, but I was almost isolated for many years. I had five children, and I stayed home and took care of those five children. It was a lot of work, and I joined few organizations. I did know that he was on the board of mental health and, I presume, many other community projects.
- B: Did Rabbi Berkowitz confirm all of your children?
- K: Yes, he did.
- B: In comparison to when you were confirmed, is there any difference in the way that he did it? Did he make it more special?
- K: Everything that he did was done in--well, it was almost like a work of art. Everything that he handled was done almost like a professional production. The children had to be dressed properly. We were told what colors they could wear, what kind of shoes they could wear. They had to be there on time. The flowers had to match, so that the event was one of pleasure. I'm sure there was plenty of controversy previous to that because I had gone to some of the sessions preparing for their confirmations with some of the young people, and at 15 or 16 years of age, they were sometimes antagonistic and very questioning. When it came to the actual ceremony, it was for every--no one was the star. There were awards given, and I'm sure that there was some anticipation as the parents sat and listened, hoping their child would get an award, but I felt that everyone was rewarded. I had heard the young people say that they didn't feel that they could really have the rapport with Rabbi Berkowitz that they did with Cantor Erlich. They almost thought of Rabbi Berkowitz as the father and Cantor Erlich as the mother. Kids of that age would come to mothers with problems rather than their fathers, so Rabbi Berkowitz may have been a little distant.
- B: Describe how Rabbi Berkowitz would run the average service at the synagogue. Was there any set way that he would run it in comparison to another rabbi? Did he have his own distinct flair?
- K: Well, the services were pretty set always. The only variety was the sermon. About 3/4 way through a service, every rabbi speaks, and I always enjoy that. I would come to temple sometimes just to sort of be recharged. I can't think of when I was ever displeased with his ability to make me think or make me feel that I was on the right path, or perhaps that he helped direct me.

- B: Was there any specific sermon done by Rabbi Berkowitz that sticks out in your mind, had special importance for you?
- K: Of course, when your own children are involved, those sermons are especially important for you, and after every bar mitzvah, the Rabbi would give some sort of little talk. I had four boys, and after the fourth boy, you know, it's pretty much the same, although I remember the first one. I remember that he made me feel that my particular boy was the most brilliant, the most talented, the most wonderful that he had ever instructed, so he certainly could do that well.
- B: Do you remember any words that stick in your head?
- K: No. I'm sorry.
- B: What are some personality traits of Rabbi Berkowitz that you would attribute to him?
- K: He had an underlying energy that you don't find in many people. That is very magnetic, I think. He had a wonderful sense of humor. Now, I know there are a lot of people with a wonderful sense of humor, but his was a generous sense of humor. He could focus in on an individual. I've described the way he made me feel about my oldest son, but he could do that with others as well. He could make everyone feel extremely important. He didn't hesitate to be honest, though, about people that he thought were dangerous, offensive, or those whose ideas he considered radical. He would discuss this openly.
- He was not a handsome man, yet he became really beautiful when you talked to him. I think he had a hair lip repaired. I'm not sure, but it looked like it to me. So, at one time, he must not have had much of a voice, yet he had a really booming, resounding, perfectly cultured voice when I knew him. He could make the "born again" preachers look silly, if he wanted to.
- B: Speaking of his humor, did he inject humor into the services at the synagogue?
- K: Yes, he did. He would use the old stage technique of throwing out a joke to catch people's attention. He could get people to laugh aloud by doing that.
- B: Are you familiar with any animosity within the temple towards him for becoming too active in any secular goings on instead of staying within the temple itself?

K: Well, as I said, I've never been involved in organizations. My husband was on the board for awhile, and all I remember saying about the board was that most of the discussions were about money, which probably is true. I know it's true of the board of the Youngstown Hospital Association. It's true of most boards. They have to run an institution, and they have to have money. But I don't know about animosity in the congregation.

I remember going to a funeral not too long ago, and somebody behind me spoke about Rabbi Berkowitz. This person was a non-Jewish friend, who remarked that it was a pity that Rabbi Berkowitz wasn't there to give the eulogy because his eulogies were the most remarkable that he'd ever heard.

B: Are you familiar with the Rabbi Berkowitz's contact with Bishop Malone?

K: That has interested me. When Rabbi Berkowitz died, Bishop Malone came to the funeral home and he was at the synagogue recently at its anniversary celebration. I went to a Zionist organization dinner at Ohev Tzedek temple this past year, and Bishop Malone was the speaker there honoring a gentlemen named Frank Haber, who had gotten an award from the organization; and his entire speech was about Rabbi Berkowitz. Now, when he was at the temple recently--I shouldn't say his entire speech--but, a large part of his speech pertained to his relationship with Rabbi Berkowitz. At the anniversary ceremony of the temple, he also spoke about his relationship with Rabbi Berkowitz, so it must have been a very strong friendship. When I was growing up, I didn't even understand that a Catholic priest could come into the synagogue, so I was very happy when I saw that he could come; and he has repeatedly done so.

B: If you had to pick something about Rabbi Berkowitz to tell somebody who had never met him, what would you tell them?

K: What kind of person am I saying this to?

B: Just a layman, just somebody that had heard some wonderful things about him but wanted to get some first hand information about what the man was really like.

K: I haven't met too many intellectual giants in my life. I think he probably was. Yet, he's the kind of man that--I know priests are called fathers--if a rabbi could be called father, he certainly could be. He was the sort of man you could come to--fortunately, I didn't have problems to bring to him, but I know if I had, I could have come to him and he would have put his arms around me and made me feel that he really cared.

It wasn't put on. He wasn't just trying to pass this off and not have anything to do with it tomorrow, or because he was required to. Now, if that answers your question, I don't know.

B: Good. I spoke to Sidney Kline and he was speaking about some of the goings on within the synagogue. Rabbi Berkowitz was a strong supporter of Israel. Was there any problems with that? Did you speak with some person at the synagogue, some individuals who were not being strong supporters of Israel and felt that his stance was [wrong]?

K: They probably existed. I don't know if you're aware of the history of the Jewish people and their immigration into this country, but the first people to come in large numbers were the German Jews. Those who were here the longest became established and became a part of the common culture, and those who were new comers were looked upon as "greenhorns." Their customs are different, so the massive wave of the Russian Jews who came in the early 1900s were found distasteful by integrated Jews. There were many German Jews who were so very integrated into the ways of the community that they probably didn't want to be associated too much with the state of Israel. For example, it would cause some people to question their loyalties to the United States, even though everybody I knew during World War II, whatever the reason, fought for this country. So, it was possible that some congregants would not have liked his devotion to the state of Israel, but I don't know of anyone personally. Nobody ever discussed it with me. I had an uncle in Sharon, Pennsylvania, whose name was Simon Bolotin, and he was very anti-Israel. My father was very pro-Israel. He thought of it as saving the persecuted Jewish people, and so I heard the discussions in the family, but I never heard it between members of the congregation, such as Sidney Kline. Is Sidney Kline a German Jew? Is Kline a German name?

B: No. Well, he was from Austria-Hungary, which could still be German, but also, there is a possibility he is not. Is there the same social distinction within the Youngstown Jewish community? Was there the old Jewish--I guess it would be the American Jewish element--and then, the later influx of the Eastern European Jewish people to Youngstown?

K: Well, do you mean what's going on today with the Russian Jews who came here?

B: No. Speaking more of partly German Jews and then having people coming from Eastern Europe, such as Austria-Hungary like Mr. Kline, was there a social

strata within the Jewish community where the German Jews would be at the top of the hierarchy and then. . . ?

K: I don't know about Austria-Hungary because you know that old joke about Hungarian recipes. Have you ever heard that about Hungarian recipes, how they all start?

B: No.

K: First you steal two eggs. (Laughter) So, I don't know if they would be considered part of the German Jewish groups of people. I think they'd like to be, but I don't think they were. Now, just about everybody is second or third generation American, so I don't think the distinction is there anymore.

B: After Rabbi Berkowitz became the scholar in residence of Rodef Sholom, was there any power vacuum caused by him leaving his post as rabbi?

K: Oh, yes. Do you mean after he left, when he retired?

B: Yes.

K: He brought in a young man, David Powers, who was very bright, but very, very young, almost in a sophomoric way. The members had grown older. The population was aging in the synagogue, and his ways were very different from Rabbi Berkowitz. Obviously, Rabbi Berkowitz admired his intellectual abilities, because he could speak off the cuff very easily; but I think a lot of people complained about the fact that his services--again, I used the word precise so often--had little grace. They were out of control, and a lot of people objected to that. He referred to himself very often, because perhaps he was young and it takes a while to mature. So, I think there probably was a problem, and they did let him go after a while. They have another rabbi, now, Rabbi Brown. I had a problem with Rabbi Powers and Rabbi Brown, simply because they were not Rabbi Berkowitz. Everybody has their special rabbi; and they measure other rabbis by their particular rabbi, and the others just don't measure up spiritually or intellectually.

B: How about Rabbi Berkowitz with the other congregations within the area, would he have been the defacto leader of the Jewish community in Youngstown during his tenure?

K: I think so. He was a very, very strong man, involved and very ecumenical. And yet, he was, first of all, an advocate of Judaism.

- B: I'm intrigued by Rabbi Powers coming into Rodef Sholom. Is it possible that it was because Rabbi Berkowitz was still there that people still looked to him? Was he still the leader of the temple at that time?
- K: I can't remember exactly how long it was, the time between when Rabbi Powers came and when Rabbi Berkowitz died, but I don't think it was too long. I don't think that's true. I think it was Rabbi Powers' own personality that caused some congregants to disapprove of him. He didn't have to make many decisions, Once he had to take care of everything, it was perhaps more than he was prepared to handle. Rabbi Berkowitz probably still did--well, knowing Rabbi Berkowitz, he probably still controlled everything. I saw Rabbi Powers recently.
- B: Is he still within the area.
- K: He teaches at Kent State.
- B: Oh, really? I started my Ph.D. there, also. (Laughter) Maybe we can get an interview with him, too.
- K: That would be really worth your while. He's very bright.
- B: Well, to be teaching at a major state university, definitely. Are there any other attributes of Rabbi Berkowitz that you think we need brought to light, or [that] you would like to talk about?
- K: Just that he was a man of amazing grace. Even the way he moved was very beautiful. I told you that I'm interested in art. I think he was a work of art. I know that he was in England during World War II, and that is where he met his wife.
- B: You speak of his brilliance. Is that a combination of his scholarship and a personal mystique, also?
- K: Well, I think it has to be, because there are plenty of scholars that don't reach out, and nobody knows about it, and their brilliance is unnoticed. This man was able to be a scholar. He did get a Ph.D. after he was here in Youngstown. I don't know where he earned it, but he didn't have one when I first met him. Nobody ever suffered for it. No patient ever went unvisited while he was getting his Ph.D. No eulogy was not uttered while he was getting his Ph.D. He was very devoted to his congregants, certainly to his religion, certainly to the temple, certainly to his wife and family. I don't know the Jewish word for it, but a "mench" will do. That means a real man, a man for all seasons.

B: There's so much about the man. Everybody has such positive things to say about him.

K: He died very suddenly at [age] 70.

B: Did that have negative impact on the temple itself, a sense of shock or disbelief?

K: You believe in death as you get older. You see it happen so often. It happens not just to your rabbi, but to your parents and uncles. People start dying around 70--some years old. I think the Bible says that that's the length of man's life.

B: Is there anything that you'd like to add about Rabbi Berkowitz or anything we haven't really touched on?

K: Well, I really--he just was so very generous as far as I could see with most personalities. He seemed, to me, to look really for the best in people. That's what was really surprising, when he'd criticize someone.

B: Do you remember any time when he did criticize somebody?

K: Yes.

B: Could you tell us about it?

K: I don't think I should. I mean, the person is still living and is still active.

B: Would you consider Rabbi Berkowitz more of a utilitarian individual?

K: Well, he was very controlled, and if you want to say that that's utilitarian, you could use that word; but he was so much more than utilitarian. He has a son, as you know, who is the director of an art museum. That's it. He's an artist. When you think in terms of sermons as an art form, he excelled, so I don't know if utilitarian is the right word.

B: Did he have a knack for--I was told--being able to remember your name?

K: Yes. That's amazing to me that he did that. There are some people who can remember people's names, and others. . . . As a matter of fact, I keep telling people about a young woman at Heritage Manor, who is there because she's somewhat retarded. She never forgets anybody's name, not anybody's, but she's retarded.

B: That's a gift to be able to do that.

- K: But, she's retarded. So, I guess it's a gift from God.
- B: Yes. Everybody has their own gift in life. You just have to--some people are searching for it all their lives.
- K: I know another young girl who is also disable, who is also an incredible statistician, so good that the coach from YSU will go to her to get her stats on a basketball game. It's interesting. None of this has anything to do with the Rabbi.
- B: Do you think there's anything else that needs added or any final words?
- K: No. I told you I didn't really feel that I could add that much to the interview.
- B: Well, this is perfect. Oral History will bring a lot more personally how. . . .
- K: I remember him on his porch. I remember feeling guilty because I hadn't had him over to dinner here and that sort of thing. But, when he came for an occasion, he acted as if he was here every single Friday night. You know, I just felt so relaxed and so warm. He had a marvelous gift, and he gave it. There are so many people who have gifts and don't give anybody any of it. He did.
- B: Thank you very much. This is excellent. This is exactly what we're looking for because, from a written piece of paper, you can't get any human emotion out of that. In the future, this will really help out.
- K: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW